

Chapter 15: Workin' Languages: Who we are Matters in our Writing

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OVERVIEW

The steady increase of movements of people around the world has transformed the face, potential, and expectations of the US writing classroom.* These intersecting shifts have also contributed to critical discussions about how writing educators should integrate students' linguistic diversity and ways of knowing into literacy instruction. This chapter's central premise is to share with students how the work that they already do with languages has great value. Specifically, the chapter introduces terms, concepts, and strategies to support students in identifying how their own multilingual workin' of languages contribute to the making of academic writing. Our goal is to support students in recognizing the value of their own language practices and to provide strategies that students can use to rethink their own relationships with writing. Orienting practices around translanguaging and envisioning students' language work as that of "language architects" creates opportunities to uplift, value, and sustain students' rich language practices, as well as ways to critically understand their academic writing experiences.

When you think about writing for school, you're probably imagining composing "formal/academic writing" where you are trying to make yourself sound like an expert, putting on an objective "academic" tone that can often feel far removed from your own voice. You might have the experience of "cleaning up" your voice to make yourself sound "appropriate," aware that people who read your writing

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might make assumptions about how much you know based on what words you use. Because you often move in and out of different languages (beyond English) or *lingos*—how you communicate with your best friend vs. how you communicate with your coworker at the local electronics store, for instance—you might be trying to filter out variations of your voice for those different ways of communicating. Doing this work, essentially trying to silence your voice, can be exhausting. And honestly, this reduction of your voice can make writing feel difficult, irrelevant, and monotone (aka boring).

The three of us, too, have wrestled with questions like, “How do I bring my own voice into academic writing,” and “How does who I am matter in my writing?” Over the years, we have developed a number of writing strategies and approaches that help us shift away from our own self-doubts and writing hurdles. What if you didn’t have to turn off who you are when you’re writing? What if we shared with you that the different ways you use languages in your everyday life can fortify your writing as you design your academic voice? As we show in this essay, we have gained critical practices to embrace all of our languages as part of who we are, shifting our writing from what’s “appropriate” or “standard” to thinking of our language vision, playfulness, and voice as part of what it means to be a *language architect*.

Architects, as Professor of Education Dr. Nelson Flores describes, make critical design choices to capture their own unique vision. Dr. Flores explains that as designers of meaning, language architects carefully consider how to work with their own languages and voice for the most successful communication in a specific situation (25). In other words, how you speak, act, and negotiate language in uneven power contexts is your working as a language architect. As Dr. Gwendolyn Pough, Professor of Women’s and Gender Studies and Dean’s Professor of the Humanities, argues about our language and writing, “we all *do* language. That is our greatest strength” (303). Following Dr. Flores’s and Dr. Pough’s arguments, we pose that in how we “*do*” language as language architects, we labor, exercise, and push ideas and boundaries about writing. This is what we mean by *workin’* languages.

This chapter shares how we, as writers and scholars, and what Dr. Ofelia García, Professor Emerita of Urban and Bilingual Education, calls emergent and experienced bilinguals, work as language architects, and resist those critical feelings that push us to suppress our own voices. We take a research-based stance on how power dynamics and assumptions about language and “good writing” often reinforce the idea of a singular standard and English language form. As we have shown in our scholarly work, such

writing “standards” often reflect historical and existent prejudices and inequities in our society that racialize writers and their divergent lived experiences (Alvarez and Wan; Lee and Alvarez). If you’re reading this essay for your writing class, your instructor likely understands this. Therefore, this chapter is also an invitation for you, our reader, to conscientiously inquire into the richness of your own voice in writing, and to critically uptake the work it takes to fully capture this potential in your own writing practice. Your disposition and attitude towards writing, as well as continuous writing practice, are part of the *workin’* required to move within and against so-called writing standards.

We begin with a brief discussion of why who you are matters in your writing by introducing how writing scholars have recently discussed the way people *do language* on a daily basis, specifically about how our ideas about language shape—and at times restrict—how we write in schooling contexts. Then, we share a few strategies that can help you to more actively bring all of your language practices and related experiences in your writing.

WHY WHO YOU ARE MATTERS IN YOUR WRITING

We want to start by recognizing that embracing who we are in our writing is a journey. It takes time for each of us to feel confident that “I matter in my writing” and comfortable with seeing ourselves as language architects. In our K-to-Ph.D. schooling experiences, the three of us have identified a number of situations that taught us to believe that the full extent of our voices did not belong, matter, or “fit” in “academic or formal” writing settings; even now, we occasionally find ourselves experimenting with new ways of bringing our full selves into our writing. In this manner, we must acknowledge that while schooling spaces may mean well, they often engage ineffective and harmful writing approaches that view the richness of our language(s) as problems to “fix” (Kinloch).

For example, as an international student of color who used to speak English as a non-dominant language, Eunjeong felt pressured to make herself sound less of who she is—a multilingual, transnational, and immigrant-generation scholar with ample experiences with how to work languages. Eunjeong often focused on following the “rules” of writing, mainly “finding” lexical and syntactical “errors,” commas, and article usage. She often sought to be read as “objective” and “neutral.” Subtracting her voice from her own writing was not difficult for Eunjeong given the prevalent focus on English proficiency and stigma surrounding international and immigrant-generation students like her. To Eunjeong, this stigma and

standard assumption about how to assess “good” writing is like the air we breathe; it’s always there, and no one needs to point that out to you.

We believe it’s not just Eunjeong who *does language* in this way. Our various experiences of learning what writing is, and how we should practice it, unfortunately, have often enforced a *deficit perspective*. When it comes to writing, ideas about what is “appropriate” are often at the heart of judgments about whether writing, and by extension the author, is “good.” These judgments also often connect to what social scientists identify as a process of racialization, by which specific and codified racial meanings are applied to communities of people, their languages and cultural practices. Thus, judgments on “good” writing extend inequities and negative racial codings in our society while suppressing our linguistic and cultural pluralism. More so, these beliefs about good “academic” writing often reinforce so-called *standard written English*, a way of falsely understanding writing in an English language as objective and monolithic.

Yes, you read this correctly: *standard written English* is not an objective set of criteria. Instead, it is an ideal that centers a “norm” often conceived as white, upper-middle class, “accentless,” and male, built from a myth that our society needs only one language (without any form of variation) for unity (“Talk American”). Of course, such a belief does not capture our multilingual reality. Many of you, who communicate within families, school, work settings, and online spaces in different languages, likely already know this and have gained great expertise on workin’ languages, even though school and other authoritative bodies might make it seem otherwise. And yet, the idea of standard English powerfully maintains our unequal realities, erasing and/or exoticizing our highly multilingual world. Dr. Flores (mentioned earlier) and Dr. Jonathan Rosa, Professor of Linguistic Anthropology, have crucially pointed out how the idea of standardized English (both written and spoken) as the “appropriate” language relies on the racialization of students, regardless of their actual language use (157-158). For instance, while Princess Charlotte of Cambridge, UK, is praised for engaging her Spanish and English bilingualism, multilingual students, who are viewed through a racializing lens, are often told that their bilingual practice is inadequate in academic spaces.

The narrow understandings of what is “appropriate” and/or academic writing are *ideological*, that is, based on a dominant system of ideas, so deeply rooted that they seem intangible and unquestionable—“like the air we breathe” as Eunjeong mentions above. And while a writing class alone can’t change existing inequalities and prejudices, it must work to highlight how these values have been constructed, so all of us writers can conscien-

tiously challenge how what is considered “good” and “clear” writing greatly depends on this dominant system of values.

Our workin’ of language(s) then reckons with the damage brought on by *monolingual ideology*. As Dr. April Baker-Bell, Associate Professor of Language, Literacy, and English Education, rightly argues in her book on *Linguistic Justice*, the judgment of Black Englishes in all their rich variant forms as “lesser than” so-called standard English constitutes *linguistic racism* (16). In this manner, our way of workin’ languages—both what we see as crucial language in our writing and how we do language as language architects—looks toward linguistic and racial justice. What we mean by this is that your voice and all the ways you use it—as part of who you are—makes all the difference, and therefore, should be amplified and cultivated.

Our strong belief that who we are and how we critically use language matters in our writing is sustained by an understanding of language identified as *translingualism*. An approach that resists monolingual ideology, translingualism views our different and varied language practices as critical in inquiring, supporting, and sustaining the full range of richness in our voices (Horner and Alvarez). Adopting *translingual-oriented* practices and attitudes means we, as language architects, work to sustain cultural and linguistic pluralism, based on language research and against linguistic injustice. While translingualism as pedagogy should be taken up collectively—by schools and committed educators who are judging and assessing your writing—many of your writing practices can also reflect this *translingual orientation*.

Any time you are about to start a “new” writing assignment, you are already equipped with ample ways of voicing and translating, with tools and ways of knowing. Tuning into the abundance of your voice, identifying its many variations and how these plural ways of voicing work with and for different types of audiences, is a way to continue building on your experiences, your *linguistic resources*, as language architects. The more you practice your different ways of communicating, the stronger and broader these resources become. Being aware of the richness of your linguistic resources when you write, as well as conscientiously engaging these resources can guide you in becoming a more effective writer, and, more importantly, one that feels more genuine to yourself.

TUNING INTO YOUR STRENGTHS: STRATEGIES AND APPROACHES

In this section, we offer specific ways of using our rich language practices to understand how they might contribute to our academic writing. These writing strategies and practices are oriented by *translingualism*, as they have been designed to support you in engaging your own linguistic experiences, positionalities, and practices at different moments of composing in a range of writing situations (e.g., traditional alphabetic-based text, multimodal, public writing).

In offering these strategies, we start with a premise: as people who do language on a daily basis in different and plural ways, we/you, writers must work to gain confidence and a sense of pride in our own diverse multilingual practices (Lee and Alvarez). We contextualize this premise in the everyday realities of our world, where *linguistic racism* and *linguistic injustice* continue to impact our communities differently. This means that many of us whose languages are racialized in various ways may have to work their academic writing contexts more so, or differently.

CULTIVATING YOUR WORDS

A frequently encountered struggle we face as writers is when the “right” words don’t come to us easily. For instance, as a college senior and a high school English Language Arts (ELA) student-teacher, Sara recalls the experience with a writing assignment for her Secondary Education course and facing a blank MS Word screen for what felt like a number of hours. Sara remembers thinking, “¿Como empezar? The right words aren’t coming to me. I don’t know what is more frustrating, that I know I have a paper due and I can’t get it started, or that I’m actually dedicating this time to my frustration?”

The struggle with finding the “right” words has a lot to do with how we have been taught to censor our voices, how we extend *monolingual ideology* on ourselves. But one way to counter this struggle is by proceeding to write (sketch, outline, list, draw) whatever words and ideas come to us as we think about the task at hand. Engaging a writing assignment in this form allows us to mess with the writing process, and to open up opportunities for ourselves to hear the many variations of our languages. Once we have some words, ideas, frustrations on paper, we give ourselves small writing tasks, like “just write whatever you can or feel about X topic for 5 minutes.” We might go back to a passage in a related reading and write about our response. We might record ourselves talking and then write down what

we find useful. The writing will sound the closest to how we sound in our heads with multiple languages and ways of speaking—the very same way it did for Sara in her mind. This strategy moves us toward the critical and creative aspects that can feel liberating and purposeful about writing, moving us beyond the restrictive forces brought on by *monolingual ideology*. Instead of treating writing as a technical skill that we either have or not, we, as language architects, design ways to sustain the embodied richness of our voices.

Cultivating our words as language architects compels us to then go back to what we wrote and revise, choosing and shaping what we hope for that specific writing situation—a particular moment, task or assignment. We revisit our writing—as a way to rethink, rewrite, and reconfigure our ideas, but also to better understand ourselves as thinkers. Examining how we shape our writing classifies as *editing*, one of the critically dynamic aspects of writing *revision*. Once we work our languages this way, we can shift our attention to lower-priority concerns in writing, such as *proofreading*. *Proofreading* refers to those revision practices that focus on checking for lexical norms and other technicalities, such as style manuals, use of commas, and capitalization. In this cyclical and higher-lower priority-oriented process, we are abandoning approaches to writing revision that either look to “weed out” the difference in our language, or simply accept such difference without critically engaging with it. So, yes, even concerns deemed as lower priority deserve some critical inquiry. For instance, throughout the years, Sara has learned to pay closer attention to how individuals idiosyncratically use commas as a way to express emphasis and tonality in their writing.

SIZING UP THE SITUATION

Sizing up the situation means tuning into what other people are saying and how they’re saying it. It means surveying and observing the situation as you consider how you will step in. For instance, Amy’s language choices are still informed by a childhood moment when she felt that she could not fully join her family’s mixed English and Cantonese conversation. We think about these moments of trying to understand what’s expected when we’re thinking about how to best approach a writing situation.

To start writing this chapter, for example, one of the first things we did was read previous contributions to *Writing Spaces* to get a sense of the expected tone and the structure. In reading what fellow writers had done, we wanted to get a feel for what these sounded like and what “moves” the authors made in each piece. Several started with an anecdote, talked directly

to readers, and explained a number of scholarly concepts in a straightforward way so that student writers could gain new or further familiarity with these terms. We also noticed that there were always specific suggestions, demonstrations, and examples. Part of doing this examination was also imaginative—how could we contribute to an ongoing conversation and push it forward? How different were the chapters from one another and which could we imagine our chapter being like? But part of this was practical—how many citations were included in each chapter? How did writers move from one idea to another? How many sections did writers use and what was the structure like? We read like writers, as Mike Bunn explained in an earlier volume of *Writing Spaces* (71-86).

We started writing by *mimicking* these moves, strategizing what we were seeing in other writings and taking on a similar tone and structure. Sometimes, we could more actively imagine ourselves writing this chapter. Sometimes we couldn't. And when it seemed like we weren't sure what to say, we just kept writing (yes, we wrote for 30 minutes to an hour every week), knowing that we could use each other's and the reviewers' feedback to revise later. We used this process to think about the expectations of this particular kind of writing. But for us, this strategy was a starting point for getting words going and in tune with the tone of the task. We found that by becoming familiar with the way the other chapters were written, we drew on our own voices with those expectations and our hopes in mind.

Engaging this *tuning in* practice is not a matter of whether you can or "can't" write "like that." Tuning in is about acknowledging that you as a writer can work to identify how your fellow writers make their moves and how you will play yours based on that knowledge—and your own writing purpose. Surveying the situation can then help ease your writing anxieties as you are expected to lean back and analyze the form and function of these other texts, and how writers, like you, like us, play our cards. Sara conceives of this practice as "tuning in without losing your rhythm; remixing that song you like so much for your own good."

This process might look different for you; What's important is: 1) figuring out how you can best gain entry into the context of the situation by sizing it up; 2) negotiating a balance between the expectations of the writing situation and your hopes for your own voice, knowledge, and authority about what you feel is important to say about this topic.

BUILDING A WRITING COMMUNITY

As much as our writing process is about what and how to do language, supporting ourselves throughout the process is equally important. After

all, if we can't make ourselves 'finish' (i.e., you have a 'finished' version of your writing), all of our efforts for workin' language won't be made visible to our readers. The resources to support our writing process can come in many forms and, therefore, can help us see how we can cultivate our writing space, even when it doesn't seem like it.

For instance, most writing assignments have their own requirements in formatting and content/organization that we are expected to meet. For this reason, when Sara feels that the writing isn't coming along, and she's "tried all the things," she often starts her writing process by checking on the style and structure requirements of writing assignments. Reflecting back on that very same Secondary Education course she took, Sara recalls the following memory: "I have several tabs open: 1) Wikipedia page on the school; 2) school's official website; 3) 2 PDFs which I've highlighted and read before about schooling and teaching writing in urban schools; 4) Purdue OWL's sample paper for MLA citation format; 5) Purdue OWL's guidelines for how to incorporate in-text citations. I begin with what seems easiest, likely of less importance, but it literally sets the page. Drawing on the sample paper from Purdue OWL and its instructions, I set up my first page in MLA format. In front of me is the hard copy of the assignment. I go over it, and create a "rough" outline of what I need."

Like Sara's example, the resources we draw on to complete a writing assignment can be set by the teacher or other authoritative models we need to consult (such as style guidelines), which may make us feel constrained in tuning into our experiences, positionalities, and language practices. However, we can still center who we are in other aspects of writing by considering how resources can be channeled through the people in our daily lives. You can design your own community of writers that can help you through the process of cultivating your voice and purpose in writing—a friend, a writing center tutor, a family member, someone who you trust and would like to share your ideas with, but also who knows you well and is willing to hear what you care about.

When Eunjeong feels stuck in fully expressing her argument and the connections among ideas, she often turns to her husband. More often than not, in the process of trying to explain, Eunjeong finds a way to resolve the connection she is trying to strengthen in her writing. But also in the process of explaining, her partner, who grew up in a different culture, language, and geographical setting, offer a series of questions or comments: "I saw a similar case for my cousin in [a rural town]"; "This may make sense in Korean, but to me, not sure because..."; "Mexicans do this, and I know my Indian friend's family did this when I was young"; "Why would

you use that word, but not X?"; "How does this relate to what you were talking about earlier?"; "Okay, so you are trying to say Z or something else?"; "What word would that translate to in Korean? Because in American English, I think it wouldn't translate easily."

These questions often guided Eunjeong to see where in her writing she needed to "spend more time." Also, importantly, the people that Eunjeong consults help her to continue writing in ways that acknowledge and amplify different values and experiences of her own and others, and ultimately help sustain her writing. The process and actual conversations in building your own writing community may look and sound different. But what's crucial is that by working our languages and ideas this way, we centralize not only our voice but also the voices of others who we trust and who care for/about our writing.

FINDING YOUR AUDIENCE

We can center who we are in our writing not only through *what* we write about and *how* but also in considering who we are writing *for*. By this, we mean who motivates us to write, who would we want to share this piece of writing with, and who does this writing impact the most? Throughout our schooling, we learn to carry the assumption that we need to write for an "academic" audience that is far removed from our upbringing and community ways of knowing. But rarely are our families, friends, or other community members understood as part of our audience, although they are very the people, including ourselves, that academics learn from, and in turn, are supposed to serve.

What if we think of our audience beyond academics and actively write for people who we share our lived experiences with? What if we foreground their experiences, perspectives, and ways of using language in our writing and start thinking about how our writing impacts ourselves and our communities? These questions likely impact not only the way we understand what is expected of us as writers but also the way we write, including the words we choose, the examples we draw on, and even the amount of details necessary to explain an idea. With "academic" audiences, we often think the expectation is to show how much we *know* about a particular topic, using "scholarly" articles or other published accounts that support our argument (e.g., summarizing and interpreting a scholar's work, using quotes and statistics, etc.). Of course, thinking of our audience beyond academia does not mean we won't do any of this work. But when we see our writing reaching beyond our classroom or university, we can approach writing in a much more personally relevant and just way.

In our own work as educators and researchers, what motivates our research and writing are our own experiences in, with, and as a part of our communities. And along with many of you, we often ask the following questions to centralize our and our communities' ways of living, knowing, and doing language: How is the discussion in the textbook, articles, or mainstream media relevant to ourselves and our communities? How does what we're reading represent our unique experiences? For instance, one motivation for us to write this peer-reviewed chapter was that many texts for college writers reinforce *monolingual ideology* and what is "appropriate," rather than centering the rich language practices writers, like us, like you, already have.

Writing for our communities can also come down to how we do language in our writing to better reach our communities. This can mean that we might have to go beyond what's conventionally understood as an "essay," or even "writing." For instance, what languages should we use to make our writing most understood by our audience? Is our alphabetic writing the most impactful choice? Should we include images, sound, and colors? How can we best explain an idea? With whose words, stories, experiences, and examples, and in what language(s)?

How you can center yourself and your community in relation to who you're writing for can certainly go beyond these questions. But your decision to think about your audience beyond "academia" is a way to show that our families, friends, and people in our communities and their lives—their language and cultural practices, histories, and ways of living—and the knowledge from their lived experiences matter. More so, it is a way to confirm what we have learned along the way, that your voice, as connected with that of your communities, shapes and transforms academic writing. In this way, who we are addressing in our writing also becomes a way of demonstrating who matters in our lived realities and experience, in our lives, and who shapes who we are in our writing.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

The strategies we've discussed here will help you turn to your own translingual-oriented practices, which are, of course, embedded in your own lived experiences and worlds and the ways that you're already workin' languages. These approaches centralize your own practices so you can continue languaging and stance-taking away from the deficit perspective in the various writing tasks you might encounter as a student and as a writer in the world. And importantly, translingual stance-taking and workin' of languages is

a work toward linguistic justice for all—particularly for those of us whose languages are racialized in different ways. If the ways that we do language cannot be equal, then as a society we must collectively work to change that.

As you finish this chapter, we hope that you understand that self-doubt about your writing is more often about the people reading and judging your writing than it is about your writing practice. Instead of focusing on what you “lack,” we encourage you to value your language and various experiences in different languages and think of yourself as language architects (Flores), drawing from the way you work with languages in your everyday life, in order to build writing where your full self, the strength of your voice, and the magnitude of your languaging is present, continuously “resistant” and amplified (Kinloch). And we hope you continue to carry that understanding and a loving gaze on your own writing and others’.

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